

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, and welcome to *Ideas*. I'm Lister Sinclair with Part Twelve of David Cayley's series "The Education Debates." Parents have a well-established right to educate their children in accordance with their own convictions. Their prerogative is recognized in the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international covenants and conventions. But what does this right consist in when it comes to public education? Does it mean that, within reason, tax monies should follow students to any school they or their parents choose? Or does it only mean that families are free to leave the public system and pay private school fees on top of their education taxes, if they like? This question of choice in public education is what retired education professor Mark Holmes calls "the most important conceptual issue facing pluralist democracies today." In tonight's program we'll look at both the pros and the cons. Should the public monopoly in education be broken or maintained? Part 12 of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley.

David Cayley

Until recently public school systems have been able to enunciate clear purposes. Upper Canada's School Act of 1850 instructed teachers in these words: "The teacher," it said, "should exert his best endeavours to impress upon the minds of all children committed to his care the principles of piety, justice and a sacred regard to truth." The act went on to enumerate other virtues including love of country, industry, frugality, chastity and temperance. Subsequent versions of the purpose of public schooling moved the emphasis from Christian virtue to citizenship. In 1915, the Ontario Supreme Court asserted that "the paramount purpose" of public education was to make children into "loyal and efficient subjects and citizens" of the state. Public education, the court said, should comprise "one comprehensive and symmetrical system embracing everyone from the Minister of Education to the youngest infant in kindergarten." Today public education seems to possess no single commanding purpose on which most of the citizens could agree. Instilling Christian virtue would still seem a good purpose to some, the production of loyal and efficient citizens to others, but what would appeal to all? When Ontario introduced its common curriculum in 1993, the accompanying document from the Ministry of Education presented the task of students as one of "adapting to changing attitudes" and suggested that this required "a climate of flexibility and understanding in which the students can develop values that they themselves consider relevant for the life they envisage." Education, in other words, has no collective purpose but is rather a matrix within which students develop their own purposes.

Uncertainty about the purpose of education is not necessarily a bad thing – it might even be the beginning of wisdom – but it inevitably raises a question: if philosophies of education differ, why maintain a monolithic, one-size-fits-all system of public education? During the last generation, this has become an urgent political question, and a number of countries have moved to expand publicly financed educational choices. So far, amongst the English-speaking countries, Canada has probably been the most cautious in this regard, but we too have an active movement pressing for an end to the public school monopoly. One of its leaders has been Mark Holmes, a former teacher, high school principal, and director of education, who later became a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Now retired, he's also the author of a number of books including Educational Policy for the Pluralist Democracy. As his career in public education suggests, he was at one time a firm believer in the ideal of the common public school. But this ideal, he says, is now outmoded.

Mark Holmes

I believe that the common school has failed and that it is no longer a viable idea in contemporary Canada, and so, what we have is a public school which is nominally a common school, but which has no commitment to anything very much because it is torn apart in so many different directions. I describe it as a low doctrine school. It does have a doctrine. It believes in non-violence, for example, and tolerance, and there's a belief in consideration for the other person, the Golden Rule, but that's it. That's all there is and the things that I think are paramount in education, in true education, are not really there. My best example is truth. In my own personal values, truth, in the broadest possible sense of the word, is the end of life, but it's also the end of education, because education should be towards life's purposes. And I see truth as now being, at best, on the back burner, and, in many cases, disappearing altogether in terms of schools' goals and activities and their functions, being replaced by all kinds of what Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher, talks about as "emotivism," passing preferences which are not connected, the flavour of the day, like environmentalism and all the other things that come. They may be important, but they're not part of 'the end of life' as it were. So I see that disappearing from the school. I see the common school as really being dead and not amenable to resuscitation. The feeble efforts that are made at resuscitation are at best semi-successful. A very energetic principal with a very energetic staff can get together and add on a few things to these three basics of the low doctrine school and perhaps it will last while the principal is there for five years, and then die when the principal moves on.

Instead, I see that for true education to survive there must be what I call "fortress monasteries," schools which live within the Babel of our times but which are still devoted to such things as truth. These schools will stand as islands, and because they are islands and because they are scorned, derided, perhaps ignored by people outside, they will then become communities because they will have bounds around them and lots of people who oppose them, which will make them stronger and help to maintain these fundamental ideas which I think are central to Western Civilization, which I think is something worth preserving and which I don't want to see destroyed. And then all the other people who don't want those things, who want to chase Mammon, who want to chase God in a very narrow sense, may be free to do it; not because I'm giving them permission, obviously I don't have permission, but because the state should give them permission. The state should say 'It's OK for you to have the kind of education you want, within certain limits.'

David Cayley

School choice, as Mark Holmes sees it, is a way of breaking up the stalemate that he calls the "low doctrine school." This stalemate is a product of the deep ideological differences that now cut across Western societies. A substantial minority of the population – perhaps 25% - remains seriously religious and continues in the once prevailing opinion that

education requires a religious framework. The secularized majority fears religion as a divisive and potentially authoritarian influence in education. Philosophies of education vary across a spectrum that runs all the way from the free school to a traditional liberal arts curriculum, and people nearly come to blows over questions like how to teach reading. Moral questions are equally contentious. Some would approve of the school I recently read about, where sex education took the form of a student, costumed as a condom, passing out free contraceptives in the halls. Others would be appalled. These differences, in Holmes view, create a condition of mutual inhibition in which no one is ever really satisfied. He thinks that the answer is to allow real differentiation to occur under public auspices.

Mark Holmes

My proposal is, in essence, to give parents the right, which they should have under the United Nations Charter, to determine the kind of education they want for their children. What I'm suggesting is that there be essentially free choice within certain limits. There are mechanical kinds of limits. One can't suddenly build a new school for 23 people who say they want this. So there's that kind of limit, and that's very easy to deal with because essentially you say you're providing so much per head for children depending on the kind of pedagogical program that they need. I would see poor children, for example, as carrying more dollars with them than affluent children, because, typically they are harder to teach in a number of different ways. I would see disabled children as obviously requiring many more dollars. So I'm not talking about a voucher system where you say 'There's \$5,000 per student. Do what you want with it.' I'm just saying that children would carry government grants with them to the school that they wanted to go to and those schools could be organized, would be organized according to the wishes of parents. There would still be a standard public school and any parent who wanted to would have the right to send their child and free transportation and everything else with it, to what I call an area public school. And at the same time, they would have the right not to send their child to that school. So there would be, for example, Catholic schools, which there are already, but there would also be Protestant schools, there might be a Seventh Day Adventist school. But there would be limits, very important limits. One is freedom of access. I think this is a very, very important stipulation, because, otherwise, you could have a school created by some small religious sect and perhaps the father or mother would commit some indiscretion. They'd be banned from membership in the sect and the children would be expelled from school. To have this being done in a publicly funded school I find abhorrent. A public school must be accessible, but at the same time a public school should be allowed to provide the kind of culture that the parents want. That I see as being an essential ground for choice.

David Cayley

By what mechanisms do you see this happening?

Mark Holmes

Well, I think the educational establishment, particularly in Ontario, but generally speaking in Canada, is so powerful, the unions, the school boards, the departments or ministries, the faculties of education, they are so much part of a group-think, that breaking up that

establishment and providing genuine choice, rather than just the approved choices of the establishment, is going to be incredibly difficult. So I think we have to have multiple ways of providing access. The most obvious one is to have alternative schools within the system and to me this is the most desirable. Unfortunately what we know is that, even in school boards that have provided alternative schools, they have turned them on and turned them off like a tap. There's no right to it. So another very important thing one has to allow is for schools to be funded directly by the province where a group of parents want to opt out from the local board and attend their own school of their own choice. This is a kind of safety valve to prevent the school board from acting in an arbitrary and authoritarian way, which is what most school boards do. Generally school boards don't let parents have the kinds of schools that they want.

David Cayley

Mark Holmes' idea of diversifying public education according to the liking of parents alarms many supporters of the present system. One common criticism is that many of the schools eligible for public support in a regime of choice would be organized on religious, or, more broadly ideological lines, and that students in these schools would therefore be subject to indoctrination. Holmes has two responses. The first is to suggest that socialization in the present system is already a kind of indoctrination. The second is to stipulate that in the regime of choice that he envisages, the state would make the student's freedom of inquiry a condition of public support.

Mark Holmes

Children have a right of access to knowledge. This comes back to my thing about truth. Supposing one is in a Baptist school. Obviously, a Baptist school is going to teach a denominational view of Protestant Christianity. That's why it's there. But what they should not be allowed is to deny children access to other avenues to truth beyond their own. What this comes down to in practice is that I believe it should be a regulation that every school have a comprehensive school library or resource centre. For example I'd certainly expect there to be books about evolution and if any mention of evolution had been banned from the school library I'd say, 'Wait a minute. You don't get one penny of public money', not because I think evolution is necessarily 100% true, but it is obviously one very important avenue of truth, believed very strongly by very many people, and it is something to which people should have access. In the same way I think there should be a Koran in every library and there should be a Bible in every library. People should have access to all the major aspects of truth. To me, this is very important.

David Cayley

Another concern about school choice is that it will aggravate social inequality. The arguments that support this criticism are, first, that expanded choice will favour those with the wealth and education to make smart choices and second, that it will drain talent and initiative out of schools in poorer areas. Holmes does not accept these arguments. It is true, he says, that the poor, by definition, lack power and knowledge, but they do not necessarily lack high aspiration for their children and mobilizing the aspirations of parents is really the essence of his plan to reform education.

The public school no longer works he says, because society has become a Babel, a confusion of tongues, where citizens lack a common ground on which to erect anything but the most rudimentary and inhibited of educational institutions. But within this decadent condition there exists a saving grace, the existence of communities that would like to revitalize the education of their children. This energy can only work, he thinks, if these communities are allowed to create schools according to their particular genius. No universal prescription can save education, Holmes argues finally, but choice provides a way of magnifying whatever popular energies do exist for its renewal.

Mark Holmes

We are living in a kind of dark age in that the dominant forces in our society are individualistic and materialistic and that the powerful cultural influences in our society have a kind of lowest common denominator. I do believe all that. And I certainly don't believe that schools can be better than society. I don't think that schools are going to transform society. I don't think that's possible. Society is more powerful than the schools. But what I do see is that the schools are adopting, not by choice, but are de facto adopting this lowest common denominator of our culture and so they are making it difficult or impossible for parents who have higher aspirations to bring those aspirations to bear on their children. So that instead of being helped by the school, they are hindered by the school. I see that the school would at least help reflect the better aspects of society, which at the moment it doesn't. It probably screens out the lowest of society, but it settles for a very low common denominator. And so this is where I see some optimism. What schools can do is capture some of the essence of the good things in society and help parents reflect those things. And they can pass them to some kids who don't have those in strength because their parents recognize them as good things and say 'yes I want those good things for my children.' In that sense, we cannot transform society, but we will be able to respect the sincere good wishes of parents and not dumb them down.

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David Cayley

In a regime of full school choice, students would be able to take their share of education monies with them to approved private schools, or in the case of home schooling to keep that money at home. At the moment several provinces partially cover students fees at private schools. B.C., for example, pays up to half of private school fees, under a formula that pays more to poor schools than to elite ones and that sets standards for schools receiving grants. Quebec, Manitoba and Alberta also partially fund private schools, with

Alberta giving grants for home schooling as well. Ontario, at the moment, funds only Catholic schools, a policy which the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools, have challenged in court. The case was decided in 1996, when the Supreme Court ruled that Ontario had no constitutional obligation to fund religious schools, though it was free to do so if it liked.

Adrian Guldemon is the executive director of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools, which was one of the plaintiffs in this case. His organization represents 73 schools that teach within the broadly Calvinist tradition that is usually called the Reformed church in Europe, and the Presbyterian or Congregationalist church in English-speaking countries. It's a tradition, Guldemon says, that has always tried to bring Christian teaching to bear on civic society.

Adrian Guldemon

Essentially the view is that the gospel has a number of imperatives in it which apply to all of life, not just to the so called ecclesiastical sphere, whatever that may be, and that consequently, to be a Christian with integrity, you need to work out the meaning of the gospel in other social spheres in life and education of course is a very important one. Or another way of putting it is that the Biblical givens about humanity and the universe are important in teaching children about life and what their role is and how they should see it and so forth.

David Cayley

Religion, in this view, is part of public life, and not just a private vocation. Education is one of the spheres in which a specifically Christian perspective demands expression, and this requires independent schools. Such schools, in Adrian Guldemon's opinion, deserve public support. When the Alliance of Christian Schools appeared before the Supreme Court, it based its argument for this support on Section 15 of the Charter of Rights, which guarantees citizens equality before the law and freedom from discrimination on the basis of such things as religion. A Christian school, on these grounds, should be neither more nor less worthy of public support than an arts school, a vocational school, a French immersion school, or any other option which families could reasonably favour for their children. The decision, according to Guldemon, should belong to the community and not to the state.

Adrian Guldemon

It's our view that the system should be decentralized and our view of the ideal school is the community-based school, not quite the little red schoolhouse, but a good medium-sized school. It's what the research shows is the most effective learning medium for students who like to be known, who like to know where they are and who like to have relationships with teachers, who like to know what it is the school is trying to teach and why and whether it's parent-supported and whether it's relevant. All those questions you can answer in detail in a smaller school. You can't answer them in detail in a large school because you've got too much of a mix. You've got a staff selection problem. You've got a parent selection problem and so you go for the lowest common denominator which is what the public school has always done. It's the industrial model which is now obsolete. So we think that if society

changes enough to get away from the industrial model in business, hopefully it will do the same thing in education and go back to community-based schools and allow parent groups and other groups to configure how they want it run, and all that should be supported by the state as a matter of principle. The state should back off controlling the system and instead say, 'look here are the norms we have for education in our society and if you meet them fine. If you don't we have a problem.'

David Cayley

Restricting the state's role in education to setting standards and distributing tax monies would give much wider scope to families and communities. This is as it should be, according to Adrian Guldemon, since these are natural societies, while the state is artificial. "Learning communities," he has written, "should grow naturally on the basis of a shared morality." Without such a basis, he says, education is inevitably an imposition on the student.

Adrian Guldemon

There's two fundamental things here. First we think it's bad for the state to try and control the mind formation of the student. The second is that we believe that the family is a fundamental building block in society and it should not be undercut by state institutions, which it currently is, because the school in fact, takes over the role of explaining what's good and bad in society. So on the one hand there's a democratic principle involved here which is that in a true democracy the state does not impose an official ideology, and the second one is simply the place of the family. You can't have a view of how important the family is when you force the child out at age three and subject its main waking hours to an outside position, which in fact turns out to be a clear doctrine at this point. If you want to know whether there's a doctrine, just look at the sex education courses in the public schools. They used to be taught as though we have sex education because we're just teaching biology. That used to be the position in the 1970s. Today no one's saying that. Today they're taught because we want to teach young people how to behave sexually.

David Cayley

The important point about this teaching for Guldemon is not its content but the fact that it constitutes a normative position - a clear doctrine, as he says. Indeed, he believes that all serious teaching embodies a doctrine, and is therefore literally indoctrination, but that the word indoctrination has very often been applied only to teachings outside the current orthodoxy. So, teaching safe sex to youngsters is not seen as indoctrination, while teaching that sex belongs only within marriage is. The distinction, Guldemon says, is thin, artificial and unsustainable.

Adrian Guldemon

I think the public policy is based on the perception that there is some sort of possible neutral position out there. That was the original argument, and I think it died in reality somewhere in the '70s when people started realizing that all education is a value-based operation and the question is not whether you have values or you don't. The question is which values are you in fact promoting. So given the fact that that's the reality in education, our view is that the public umbrella ought to be extended to cover all viable options. And

rather than saying we're going to teach three or four options in the public school system and exclude a couple for the private school system, our view is that, in a democracy, all viable, good educational options should be under the public umbrella. And whether it's a secular perspective or Christian, or there's a number of other possibilities, that's really not relevant from the state's point of view.

David Cayley

If this view was accepted, and the charade of neutrality ended, Guldemonnd says, teaching in the public schools would improve. Good teaching often arises from commitment to a particular view of a subject, but such commitment is inhibited in settings where the size of the school, the heterogeneity of the students, or the competing visions that now exist of the curriculum dampen such passions and lead to more colourless teaching. If real philosophical diversity were allowed, he says, teachers would be freer to develop their own orientations.

Adrian Guldemonnd

I think it would give communities a chance to work out coherent and consistent educational environments without political interference. The problem with the current system is, we have a great many good teachers in the system, but the system itself has been a brake on much of the good teaching. And by the way, that would also create a fantastic research base. Most people don't think of that. Whatever little research there is on education in Canada has been skewed by the fact that it's all happening in legally controlled public schools. If we were to de-legalize the system there would be much more actual educational experimentation possible and then you could have good debates about what's the best way to learn and what's the best way to teach.

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David Cayley

Adrian Guldemonnd sees no need for public education to be as controlled as it currently is, and he sees the struggle to free education from state control as analogous to earlier struggles of the Calvinist churches for an end to the privileges of established churches. The current public education system, to this way of thinking, is an established secular church: it's monolithic, it possesses an exclusive jurisdiction, it deploys a large clerical bureaucracy administering a prescribed ritual which is believed to be uniquely efficacious, and it claims to possess the keys to heaven. Guldemonnd thinks that this system ought now to be disestablished, in favour of a more diverse and heterogeneous design, and that his tradition of Christianity once again has a part to play in this overthrow.

Adrian Guldemonnd would like to see every child's share of the education budget follow him to the school of his family's choice, so long as the school met the state's educational standards. Another approach to school choice is the charter school. These are public schools operating under a charter, granted by some competent public authority, which sets out their particular character. Like other public schools they must be non-sectarian, and without fees or admission requirements, but they are otherwise free to follow their own purposes, so long as they fulfill the commitments made in their charters. The idea is to

combine the freedom and flexibility of a private school with the accessibility and accountability of a public school. In Canada so far, only Alberta allows charter schools - it currently has ten - but the idea has been tried more widely in the United States and other English-speaking countries. In the U.S., more than half the states now have charter legislation, a thousand charter schools have been created, and President Clinton, who is an enthusiastic supporter of the idea, has called for the creation of 3,000 within the next five years.

Joe Nathan is a former teacher who now directs the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. He participated in the movement that made Minnesota the first American state to adopt charter legislation in 1991 and he's the author of Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education. The schools he describes in this book are extremely diverse: they are located in both rich communities and poor communities, in regular school buildings and in improvised quarters in an old grocery store or post office; their founders are parents, teachers, popular organizations, and in a few cases, private companies. The curricula they follow are extremely varied. Here's one that Joe Nathan described to me.

Joe Nathan

There's a school in a rural part of Minnesota, Minnesota New Country School, that is located in a little town called LeSueur. Some of your listeners may remember there used to be ads for the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant. They sold peas and corn and this is that little town, LeSueur. Some of the teachers have organized a school where there's one computer for every two youngsters and the youngsters have become so sophisticated with computers that they literally help local businesses to create web sites on the Internet. This is a school where they see the world as a place to learn, where they see the building only as a headquarters. These are youngsters who go out into the community, because all of them are required to demonstrate that they know how to provide service to the community and to the school as part of their graduation. The youngsters discovered, as part of a water quality-testing project, that there were hundreds of frogs that had three or five legs rather than the typical four. They called the pollution control agency in the state which said, 'There, there. That's nice kids.' and didn't seem very interested, so they called their legislator who said 'let's look into this some more.' They contacted somebody at the university who said 'Yes this really is a problem.' and testified at the legislature and now the legislature has allocated thousands of dollars and people all over North America have discovered that there are many of these frogs that have some genetic defects and they have discovered that there really is a serious problem and this is a problem first identified, as far as we know, in the United States, by these youngsters in this charter school in rural Minnesota.

David Cayley

Another innovative charter is located an hour's drive from LeSueur in St. Paul, Minnesota, where The City Academy is housed in a underused city recreation building. This school accepts only dropouts and combines its academic curriculum with neighborhood renovation projects. Other charters follow more traditional academic paths. This diversity says to Joe

Nathan that the charter movement is populist, rather than being inherently of the left or of the right. This populist character, he says, is reflected in the changing attitude of teacher unions towards charters. Once strongly opposed, a number of teachers unions have now become supporters of the movement, as they have seen their own teachers successfully start charter schools. In a similar way, Nathan says, the record of charter schools has begun to change the minds of other critics who at first argued that expanded school choice would favour only the better off.

Joe Nathan

We have found that the youngsters attending many of these charter public schools tend to represent families that are every bit as low income as the average. In fact, in many states, including here in Minnesota, youngsters who attend charter public schools are much more likely to be from low income families, are much more likely to be from communities of colour, are much more likely to be children who have special education problems, are much more likely to be children who do not speak English at home, than other public schools in the state. And that's true of a number of states. It's not true of every state. It really does depend on the details of the program, but many of the advocates of this program are, in this country, the advocates of low income people and are themselves parents, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, of low income people. So our experience is that it's clearly not the elite and in many cases these charter schools have been started by organizations that work with low-income families. The Tejano Center for example in Houston, is a community service organization in a very low-income section of Houston and it is these organizations themselves that are starting the schools. So parents tend to have a lot more faith, in many cases, in community organizations in low-income communities than they do, frankly, in the schools, so our experience has not been that these schools are elite institutions.

David Cayley

Charter school legislation in the United States now varies considerably from state to state. In some states, only local school boards can grant charters; in others, state boards of education, universities, or even, in some cases, municipalities can grant them. Whether charters are exempt from the provisions of the prevailing union contract is another key difference. The current distribution of charter schools reflects these differences: in the six states with the strongest laws there are 226 charter schools, in the six with the weakest laws there are sixteen. Alberta's legislation in these terms has generally been regarded as weak by those who would like to see this idea take root in Canada. Education writer Andrew Nikiforuk, for example, criticizes the Alberta law for requiring charter schools to be innovative, rather than simply good, and for failing to provide any support for the schools once established. Joe Nathan sees the charter school as an essentially democratic institution, a popular check on the power of educational bureaucracies. It gives those who want to create schools an alternative, and the existence of an alternative, he says finally, gets the attention of the public school establishment.

Joe Nathan

In Rochester, Minnesota, home of the Mayo Clinic, a group of parents had pleaded with the

School District for years to offer a Montessori public school and the District had refused, saying that they believed in equal educational opportunity and what they really meant was identical educational opportunity. All of the elementary schools were the same. Well, the parents finally created a private Montessori school and were very frustrated and some parents couldn't afford to send their kids to a private school and so continued to agitate. For a period of eight or nine years, they received the same response. 'No. We're going to offer the same kinds of programs to all the children. That's equal educational opportunity.'

Then the charter law passed and it allowed people, after a year or two, to go to a university to get permission to open a charter school. They didn't just have to go to the local school board. So the parents went back to the school committee and said 'We've been talking with you. Now we are here to tell you that we'd really like to work with you to create a Montessori public school in Rochester, Minnesota, but if you won't do it then we're going to ask the university for permission to create this.' And the school committee said 'No. We think you're right we're ready to work with you.' And the following fall there was a Montessori public school.

I think that the charter movement brings together some of the basic principles of a democratic society and I certainly include your kind of democracy as well as our kind of democracy and that's why, in this country, it's been perceived, not as an idea of the left or right, but as an idea that can help. It's not certainly something that will solve, because nothing will solve, but it will help reduce problems that we have in public education and will significantly increase the likelihood that many youngsters will attain their possibilities.

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David Cayley

School choice is a contentious question, particularly on the political left, where such things as charter schools are viewed as a threat to equality and fairness in public education. Typical is a recent article in Canadian Forum by Murray Dobbin, a writer and broadcaster and the former Communications Director of the B.C. Federation of Teachers. The article is sardonically titled, "What Did We Earn in School Today?" and it portrays charters as a halfway step to the complete privatization of public education as well as a boon to the already privileged. This is an argument that is hard to square with Joe Nathan's evidence that in Minnesota, charters have catered more to disadvantage groups. Some of the confusion depends on what kind of charter schools is being discussed. In the United States, education is essentially local, which allows the variety and individuality of charter school types that Nathan has observed. In Murray Dobbin's article, most of his evidence is drawn from England, Australia, and New Zealand, where charter schools are part of uniform national systems, and this tends to force them into a more elite, academic mould. Andy Hargreaves is a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and the director of the Institute's International Centre for School Change. He has studied the effects of charter schools in England, Australia and New Zealand, and he says that in those countries, they have not expanded opportunities or equalized educational chances.

Andy Hargreaves

The rhetoric of charter schools is that they can set up a different orientation to that which is dominant in the district if they wish. For example, if you want a more alternative style school with more student-centred pedagogies, ways of teaching, if you want a school that focuses on environmental studies, a green school, then you can establish such a school if there's a demonstrated need for it. There's a kind of liberalism there that believes that you will get a thousand points of light, great diversity, response to many different kinds of parental and community need. What tends to happen though, in practice, is that these charter schools aren't created in a vacuum. If they were created in a society that wasn't really a society at all, that was neutral, then diversity would be a possibility. But if the rest of your public school system measures school performance by a set of standardized targets, if those targets look as if they conform to a rather conventional curriculum of the kind that you and I might remember from our school days in terms of subject categories, subject content and so on, then parents get anxious. They want their kids to go to college. They want them to do well. They know what the criteria of competition are for those college places and so most parents tend to choose conservatively, in fact more than conservatively, in setting up their charter schools. So the result is that charter schools oddly begin to look very much like each other, rather than very different from one another. I came across a group of principals in Australia who were all in a market system of parental choice in secondary schools for their students. They were all putting large amounts of money into advertising to attract students. All their ads appeared on the same day in the same newspaper. And they looked at them and all the ads were completely like each other. They all said they were caring schools. They all said they set high standards and expectations. They all had a school uniform. They all had good relationships with parents. The rhetoric was that this market would create enormous diversity. The reality was that they were absolutely identical because the terms of competition were common for them all.

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David Cayley

The uniformity that Andy Hargreaves sees among Australian charter schools, as opposed to the variety Joe Nathan observes in the U.S., suggests that the effects of choice will vary according to the regime within which it is established. This seems to me an important principle to keep in mind, if one wants to avoid comparing apples and oranges. If all schools are judged by short-term, standard measures, if education is seen as essentially a competition, and academic achievement, in the narrowest sense, is deemed the only road to a decent career, it is unlikely that any amount of choice will produce much real diversity. The benefits of choice must therefore be judged in context.

Another objection to greater choice is that it will result in segregation of citizens according to religion, academic aptitude, or whatever other attribute might become the focus of a school community.

Heather Jane Robertson is director of professional development for the Canadian Teachers Federation, and the author of the recently published No More Teachers, No More Books, which warns of the threat of free enterprise in education. Greater choice, she says, will make individual schools less diverse and less challenging to the prejudices of the

home.

Heather Jane Robertson

School is one of those places where you find out that just because you want things that way, it ain't necessarily going to happen that way, that you don't always come first, that sometimes you have to take your turn, that sometimes life is boring, that sometimes other people are obnoxious and that you are not, by virtue of the fact either that you're the apple of your parents' eye, or that you're a particularly rich or gifted little kid, going to be treated as any more special than anyone else. Public education is that kind of interim stage. In the family everyone is extraordinarily special and understandably, family virtues and values are hallowed and unchallenged and everybody holds them, and you pride yourself in how much connection and agreement there is. At least that's how we perceive a good family. If you contrast that with the kinds of skills you need to live successfully and with integrity and as a citizen in the larger world, there has to be a transition period. So the school is the transition between the private world of the family and the public space. It is very hard for some to do the letting go that's required, to accept that school necessarily confronts the student with people who don't think the way their parents do, or their brothers and sisters, who come from different experiences, where some people are more difficult or more fun than the people at home, where there's a whole wide range of things in which you have to learn to negotiate your space in a world which has difference on every front.

David Cayley

Robertson contrasts this vision of the school as a diverse, demanding democratic community with the vision of the school as a sheltered enclave that she thinks animates the demand for choice. The symbol, for her, of this threatened segregation of citizens is the charter school.

Heather Jane Robertson

Charter schools promote themselves as places where everyone agrees, where there is no debate, where you're all of like mind and in reality also of like religion and like social and economic class. But if you think of it that way, it is a perpetuation of the cocoon of the family that wraps around and doesn't challenge those fundamental assumptions. I believe that public education, at its best, never intends to rob kids of those assumptions and beliefs that started and are perpetuated within the family, but it's absolutely obligated to respectfully challenge all of those ideologies, without discriminating for or against one set because they come from the left or the right or because they are more or less religious or secular. All are put up for respectful and thoughtful examination, not necessarily for the purpose of changing kids, but for opening kids to the possibilities of other ways of thinking.

We absolutely must have that if we're going to live together in a democracy. Charter schools are a terrific preparation for living in a gated community.

David Cayley

Heather Jane Robertson's final argument against school choice is that it will aggravate inequality. Where the others you have heard tonight see in the exercise of choice a natural parental right, a check against bureaucracy, a chance to experiment, and an

acknowledgement of the philosophical paralysis of the common school, Robertson mainly sees the emergence of a free market in educational services. And she thinks that this market will inevitably operate against the interests of the weakest citizens.

Heather Jane Robertson

It's not just who chooses and what happens to them in a system of choice. It's about all those who are not chosen, because the cruel irony of schools of choice is that everywhere they've got off the ground it looks like parents are choosing, but very quickly the school starts choosing the students. The power shifts. Schools find some kinds of students far more attractive than other kinds, for all sorts of reasons, the innate talents of the kids, the involvement of the parents. This is the way the market will work whether or not anyone intends it to and I think that's a really important point here. The market will select for those clients and customers which are most attractive to it because that's the way the market works, not because the principal of that school or the board of directors is necessarily setting out to ensure no poor child ever attends that school. It's been documented over and over again that intent is not more powerful than the mechanism of the market. You can wish that a school be egalitarian and inclusive, but once it begins to compete with other schools for the same kids, for the same dollars, it will increasingly select in favour of certain kinds of kids and against others over and over again.

David Cayley

Heather Jane Robertson thinks that school choice threatens to undermine democracy, disentitle the unlucky young who can't keep up in the new educational rat race, and produce a more unequal and more divided society. Joe Nathan, Adrian Guldmond and Mark Holmes see in the same policy the possibility of an educational renaissance. To me the main difference between the two views turns on the question of whether the common public school remains a vital, adaptable organ of democratic life, as Robertson believes, or whether this institution is now moribund and ought to give way to a community and family-based model of public education. The question runs deep and a lot depends on the answer.